

## CHAPTER 8

# THE STATE AS THE EMPLOYER OF LAST RESORT – THE IDEA AND SELECTED APPLICATIONS

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### Introduction

In recent years, the idea of full employment has again become the subject of public debate. At the same time, in many countries, governments have taken actions aiming at direct creation of jobs. In this context, such terms as *Job Guarantee*, *Public Sector Employment* or *The State as Employer of Last Resort* are used. These actions were usually a reaction to crisis situations, particularly in less developed countries, but it seems that they require careful consideration in the context of more advanced economies. It is because we are dealing with a rebirth of an idea, which had once been a declared goal of many governments in the most developed countries. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to present the idea of the *Employer of Last Resort* (ELR), and selected examples of its execution in India and Argentina as well as a consideration of the ELR application in Poland, based on the potential of social cooperatives.

### Renewal of the full employment idea

Full employment has once already become the declared objective of many governments in the most developed countries. Governments and political elites of Anglo-Saxon countries during World War II recognised a high employment rate or even full employment as a political objective for the time of peace (Arndt, 1994; Barber, 1996, pp. 153-171). Ideas that dominated that period are best expressed in the title of William H. Beveridge's book *Full Employment in a Free Society* (Beveridge, 1945). However, several decades later, the conviction which prevailed in the mainstream economics was that the observed high unemployment rates cannot be eliminated by the means of economic policy. The main argument for this position can be found in the concept of the natural rate of unemployment, or Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment which found

its way to school textbooks and significantly influenced the public opinion (Friedman, 1977; Phelps, 1995). According to the idea of the natural rate of unemployment, expansive fiscal and monetary policy, through the increase of total demand, leads to temporary reduction of unemployment, but it initiates the process of price inflation, which decreases the total production and raises the rate of unemployment over its “natural” level. The consequence are oscillations of the unemployment level around the natural rate. The political conclusion of theories of this kind is the recommendation to influence rather the total supply, thus stimulating economic growth in the long term.

It seems that in the mainstream of the economic and political debate, the idea of full employment was abandoned in favour of the discourse about economic growth. However, those who believe in an egalitarian value system cannot come to terms with such a state of affairs. Unemployment is only a part of the problem; part-time employment, low salaries, and job insecurity of a considerable part of the workforce are important issues as well. The loss of prosperity is also connected with the fact that when some work too little, others work too much, feeling the effects of the lack of free time, which is an important ingredient of a dignified life. The situation on the job market is functionally linked to the division of income within the society. Increasingly well documented and growing inequality of incomes, among numerous other negative outcomes, threatens the foundations of democracy (cf. Stiglitz, 2013). Significant inequalities engender resentments and social conflicts; Beveridge understood it, and in his book, he included the motto: *misery generates hate*. There is no shortage of evidence that lower levels of inequality are correlated with a lower level of negative social phenomena that destroy the cohesion of modern societies (Wilkinson, Pickett, 2009).

In this situation, adherents of the return to full employment began to lean toward the theory that to achieve this goal, it is necessary to introduce institutional changes in the organisation of the labour market. It was expressed most emphatically by a post-Keynesian economist Hyman P. Minsky in his book *Stabilizing an Unstable Economy*, published in 1986. According to Minsky, in a developing market economy there is no possibility of achieving full employment automatically, as capitalist economies are characterised by an immanent instability stimulated by the financial system. Financial markets cyclically generate unrecoverable debt. The cause lies in the fact that investors expect financial instruments to yield them at least a market, risk-free rate of return, whereas real financial outlays often bring lower profits or losses. The mechanism of competition for the capital leads to taking increasingly risky actions. Cyclical financial crises lead to disturbances of economic growth. The stable growth in the three decades after WWII was a temporary departure from this pattern. As a result of

this fundamental instability of capitalist economies on the labour market, cyclical unemployment occurs. According to Minsky, overcoming this unemployment by stimulating private investments is highly problematic, as it creates strong inflation pressure, which makes it difficult for the private sector to earn profits sufficient to pay off its debts. In the face of these adversities, Minsky proposed a more radical policy of overcoming unemployment: *The main instrument of such policy is the creation of an infinitely elastic demand for labour at a floor or minimum wage that does not depend upon long- and short-run profit expectation of business. Since only government can divorce the offering of employment from the profitability of hiring workers, the infinitely elastic demand for labour must be created by government* (Minsky, 2008, p. 343). This is precisely the role of the state as the *Employer of Last Resort*: a state agency could offer employment according to the unified payment rate to every person of working age who remains unemployed. A historical precedent that Minsky invoked were institutions from the New Deal era: Civilian Conservators Corps, National Youth Administration, and Work Progress Administration (WPA), which in the period of its greatest activity employed over 2 million people in public works. The establishment of an agency similar to WPA would allow replacing cyclical fluctuation of the unemployment level with the changes in the employment by WPA. In Minsky's opinion, establishing an ELR-type agency would be possible at a cost amounting to 0.55% of GDP. It would mean replacing the system of benefits with income from work. Other social profits would be created as well: *These permanent programs will provide outputs – public services, environmental improvements etc., that a transfer-payment government does not yield, as well as the creation of human resources* (Minsky, 2008, p. 347). Therefore, an ELR-type programme would not be an ordinary money transfer, although funds for its running should be provided by the state. According to the author of *Stabilizing an Unstable Economy*, the state supplying jobs for every interested person should not disturb the market mechanism, because salaries within the ELR would remain at a level lower than in other sectors of economy. Therefore, it will be easy to acquire workers employed through ELR programmes to work in other jobs. The payment rate, stable and uniform across the country, should also be a factor that stabilises prices. Minsky believed that the execution of the idea of the state as the ELR should not cause more inflation pressure that previously applied methods of macroeconomic policy.

Minsky remains a prominent figure for the post-Keynesian current (see also: King, 2003; Toporowski, 2005), however post-Keynesians themselves are in the position of outsiders to the mainstream economics. For a dozen or so years, the idea of the state as the ELR was discussed only in a narrow circle of post-Keynesians and leftist institutionalists. Its most enthusiastic supporters were

Mathew Forstater (1998), Randall Wray (1998; 2000), and Pavlina Tscherneva (2005). In the older generation of economists, William Vickrey supported the notion of the possibility of reconciling full employment with price stability, although he had a slightly different idea than Minsky and his disciples. Vickrey was a supporter of transferrable rights to apply a mark-up on costs, and according to his idea, if someone wanted to raise prices, they would have to buy the right to do so from someone willing to lower their prices (Vickrey, 1992). The lasting high unemployment rate has lately been a concern also for mainstream economists. One of them is Edmund Phelps who proposed to subsidise the wages of low-income workers, which would encourage employers to employ more of them (Phelps, 2007).

### **Selected programs of the *Employer of Last Resort* type**

Within the last several years, the idea of the state as the *Employer of Last Resort* was applied in the economic policy of certain countries. This refers mostly to the countries outside the North-Atlantic circle, European countries spend only a meagre percentage of their GDP for direct creation of jobs (Atkinson, 2015, pp. 141-142). The largest programme of this type is still the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India introduced in the framework of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which was adopted by the parliament of the Republic of India in 2005. The programme replaced local programmes of public works that had previously existed in certain states; it was gradually introduced in the years 2006-2008, and covers the territory of India with the exception of urbanised areas. The scope of the programme is enormous, considering that two-thirds of the population of the country resides in rural districts. Thanks to NREGA every resident of the Indian countryside acquires the right to be employed for at least 100 days a year in public works organised by the programme, and is entitled to a salary equal to the statutory minimum wage. The central authorities ensure the funding for the programme, while detailed plans are prepared by the authorities of each state, as well as local authorities (NREGA 2005). Most works in the framework of NREGA concerns the maintenance and expansion of the irrigation system, which is of key importance for Indian agriculture. The programme clearly serves two objectives: on the one hand – the improvement of agricultural productivity and development of local infrastructure, and on the other hand, it guarantees the effect of redistribution, preventing extreme poverty among rural residents (Bhagwan, 2009). The research on the functioning of NREGA seems to confirm that the programme enables supplying work and income to the rural residents without causing the effect of driving out work from previously existing jobs (Jeyaranjan, 2011). However,

it is not always possible to complete ambitious employment plans, which in certain cases seem to stem from the fact that wages proposed by NREGA are not attractive for people employed in agriculture (Dey, Bedi, 2010). It seems that the policy of subsidising rural labourer's work plays an enormous role in maintaining elementary social cohesion in a vast and dramatically diverse society. India's rapid economic growth is based on the development of industry and services located in urban areas, while the majority of the population remains within the confines of traditional economy, where the mechanism of agrarian overpopulation is still present and active. The goal of India's government is to enable rural residents access the share in the profits of the economic growth, as well as the retention of population in rural areas. In India, with its 1.2 billion people, spontaneous migration to cities could lead to the overpopulation of cities on a scale incomparable with anything we have ever seen before.

One of the largest ELR programmes is Argentinian "*Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados (Jefes de Hogar)*", implemented in response to the economic crisis that occurred after the collapse of the peso in 2001. A sharp rise in unemployment and the collapse of income of most households had led to demands of swift action from political authorities. The interim government of president Eduardo Duhalde announced *Jefes de Hogar*, which was directly inspired by the idea of the state as the ELR. According to the decree of 2002, every head of a household (both women and men), with dependants under the age of 18, received for an indefinite period a monthly income in the amount of 150 pesos, which involved the obligation to work for at least 20 hours a week. These wages were lower than the minimum monthly wage at the time, which was 200 pesos. In the first months after the launch of the plan, the number of participants reached almost 2 million, to later dwindle down back to 1 million. The plan was executed with relatively low fiscal cost of 1% of GDP (Kostzer, 2008; Galasso, Ravallion, 2004; Tscherneva, 2005; Iturriza, Bedi, Sparrow, 2011). At least some objectives of the programme were successfully achieved: families affected by poverty gained income, performing at the same time useful jobs. It could be assumed that spending this money for ongoing consumption resulted in the multiplier effect stimulating the rebirth of the Argentinian economy. There is no doubt that the functioning of the *Jefes de Hogar* programme was correlated with the rapid economic growth and reduction of unemployment. More problematic is the role of the programme with regard to the return of the unemployed to the labour market. Research carried out by Iturriza, Bedi, and Sparrow (2011) suggests that people involved in the programme were less willing to enter the regular job market. However, the interpretation of these results is difficult. It is evident that most programme participants are women, and furthermore, the participation of women has increased with time. It can be explained by the fact that

a significant part of participants are people that had previously remained outside the job market. Meanwhile, the reluctance of men to participate in *Jefes de Hogar* was explained by the fact that they were working in the informal sector, leaving the participation in *Jefes de Hogar* to their spouses (Tscherneva, 2005; Iturriza, Bedi, and Sparrow, 2011).

**Table 8.1** Characteristics of NREGA and Jefas y Jefes de Hogar programmes

	INDIA	ARGENTINA
<b>Programme</b>	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA).	Jefas y Jefes de Hogar
<b>Scope and initial actions</b>	From 2005 (launch in 2006); Execution in 200 of the most backward rural areas of India, finally ca. 600 districts covers. The programme included approx. 74 million people in 47.9 million households.	From 2000 (launch in 2001); Execution in the entire country – both urban and rural areas. Main effects of the programme were observed in non-urbanised areas.
<b>Circumstances of making the decision on the execution of the programmes</b>	Overpopulation of the countryside and differences in the speed of development between rural areas vs. cities. Avoiding uncontrollable influx of population to the cities and development of slum zones.	Negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank on the subject of the execution of a corrective programme as well as money transfers under the condition of the implementation of a programme in support of employment. A low enrolment rate among teenagers below the age of 18. Loss of social legitimisation, and collapse of the political system.
<b>Premises of the programme – key actions</b>	Employment in public works up to 100 days a year, with the minimum wages at the level of at least 100 rupees a month, instead of money transfers paid out by local authorities. Mainly simple physical labour.	Working 20h a week in the areas indicated by the programme – socially useful tasks, education, social welfare, infrastructure, and services. Global approach to the issue, reduction of unemployment, integration of excluded groups, social support.
<b>Addressees of activities</b>	Unqualified persons from rural areas; Parity, at least 33% women.	Persons from excluded groups, working on the informal market; Additional financial support for people coming back to school before the age of 18.
<b>Supplementary actions</b>	Programme package – Freedom of Information Act, Forest Rights Act, Right to Education, Right to Food.	Actions in 6 areas: communal projects, microenterprises, return to school, work in administration in communes, private employment.
<b>Further activities</b>	Continuation NREGA 2015.	Barriers in the realisation of the project and the lack of continuity of work caused projects in certain regions to be halted.

<b>Additional effects</b>	Empowerment of women and disintegration of caste and tribal influences were indicated; Main beneficiaries became persons working on the informal market (particularly agriculture) who remained unemployed as a result of natural disasters, and who earned less than the minimum wages in the programme; An increase in the cost of work in agriculture was noted where NREGA programmes exist, including tea plantations, by approx. 10% (according to the data of Reserve Bank Governor).	Main recipients turned out to be persons under 35, mainly women and people previously unemployed or working on the informal market; Certain areas of agricultural and food production noted an increase in salaries which had been below the minimum threshold. Limitations of access to employees in agriculture, since planned work was less “seasonal”.
<b>Obstacles encountered during the execution of the programme</b>	Corruption among the officials responsible for reporting demand, registration and settlement of participants of the programme. The least developed states have also the least developed infrastructure; Misuses – reporting large groups of people to work, losing application cards, delays in payments, middlemen in the process of paying out funds, discrepancies between funds received by employees and declared by officials.	Depreciation of qualifications of a part of people and their subsequent difficulties in returning to the open job market induced upskilling trainings for people who had worked previously; Too small an allowance, according to a part of the participants; Development of a benefit pay-out system – through bank accounts and in cities – debit cards that entitled to additional discounts.

Source: Based on: Fraser, 2015, pp. 679-694; Kostzer, 2008, pp. 1-30.

## Social cooperatives in Poland

In the context of the Polish reality, the potential to develop into an ELR programme exists in social cooperatives. They are institutions of subsidised work, established to employ people who belong to groups that are difficult to employ on the open labour market. Their development was enabled by social policy transformations in Poland, when in 2003-2006, work on a set of five “activation acts”<sup>1</sup> coincided with Poland’s accession to the European Union, which was reflected in the adopted institutional and legal solutions “preferred” by the Member States (Szarfenberg, 2008; Rymsza, 2014, pp. 139-167, in: Karwacki, Kaźmierczak, Rymsza, 2014). Their subsequent amendments enabled to prepare a catalogue of the so-called active labour market instruments, which include actions that influence both supply and demand for work. Influencing the demand is executed, among others, through: public works, intervention works, and loans for the unemployed to start business activity, including establishing social cooperatives. The latter, as an integral part of active social policy, are

<sup>1</sup> The Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work and the Act on Social Employment were adopted in 2003. In 2004 – the Act on Social Welfare and the Act on the Promotion of Employment and Employment Market Institutions; In 2006, the Act on Social Cooperatives.

supposed to serve social and professional integration of groups in danger of exclusion (Frączek, Laurisz, in: Frączek, Hausner, Mazur (Eds.), 2012, pp. 157-177).

Apart from specific acts, the place of a social cooperative in the state social and employment policy is determined, among others, by: the National Action Plan for Employment (2015-2017), National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2020, National Social Economy Development Programme (2014) as well as particular regional programmes for social economy development or Regional Operational Programmes for the years 2014-2020. As Barbara Godlewska-Bujak and Cezary Miżejewski remark, defining the relationship between the public administration and social cooperatives indicates the entitlement of the former to reinforce the position of cooperatives as an instrument of social policy, which eventually should contribute to the achievement of social cohesion and integration (Godlewska-Bujak, Miżejewski, 2012, pp. 12-15).

Establishing social cooperatives by natural persons is supported by the funds from the Labour Fund, State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON), or funds from the European Social Fund. This group of founders from the very beginning has been dominated by the long-term unemployed (63.4%) as well as persons with disabilities (14.4%) (Information for the years 2014-2015, p. 42). Moreover, cooperatives can be run by legal entities – NGOs, church legal persons, and territorial self-government units (TSU). These, in turn, according to the idea, are supposed to play the role of partners in providing assistance and social integration conducted by social welfare centres, e.g. by providing temporary employment within the so-called beneficiary reintegration track, or to enable working off tenant debt (National Poverty Prevention Programme) (2014 pp. 69-86). The fragmentary nature and the lack of cohesive research in particular regions do not allow assessing what percentage of cooperatives indeed conducts business activity and remains on the market. However, it is estimated that a greater ability to stay on the market exists in social cooperatives founded by or associated with legal entities. However these, even though their number gradually grows, constitute a smaller percentage in comparison to social cooperatives founded by natural persons (27.8% to 72.2%), and in over 83% of them one of the founding members is an NGO, while in 51% a TSU (Information for the years 2014-2015, pp. 37-40). The total number of registered social cooperatives in Poland in the years 2009-2015 increased from 187 to 1266<sup>2</sup>.

The dynamic increase in the number of social cooperatives since 2011 was caused by projects financed by the Human Capital Operational Programme 2007-2013 (HCOP) (Izdebski, Ołdak, in: Żołędowski, Ołdak, 2015, p. 18).

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<sup>2</sup> According to the data in the National Court Register, in 2017 there were 1,525 registered social cooperatives – as of 30.04.2017, [www.ems.ms.gov.pl/krs/](http://www.ems.ms.gov.pl/krs/); Meanwhile the National Catalogue of Social Cooperatives includes 1,377 entities, as of 28.04.2017, <http://www.spoldzielniesocjalne.org>.



However, it should also be remarked that in the years 2010-2014, the amount of the funds transferred within the formula of entrusting the execution of public tasks with social cooperatives increased from approx. PLN 1 million to PLN 19.7 million. While in the formula of support in the same period, the amount increased from PLN 30,000 to PLN 436 million (Information for the years 2010-11, pp. 14-15; Information for the years 2014-2015, pp. 25-26; Report for the years 2014-2015, pp. 13-33). It means that public administration bodies increasingly often decide to cooperate with social cooperatives. This, in turn, can translate into their stability and achievement of social and economic goals that serve reintegration into society and securing jobs for people in the groups most likely to be affected by social exclusion.

**Table 8.2** Selected statistics concerning social cooperatives in the years 2009-2015

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Means from the Labour Fund for the establishment of social cooperatives	PLN 839,800	PLN 2,135,900	PLN 819,600	PLN 1,759,300	PLN 1,423,100	PLN 2,717,900	PLN 2,133,100
No. of people covered by LF assistance	77	189	75	140	105	88 (incomplete data)	49 (incomplete data)
Total no. of social cooperatives in the NCR	187	276	425	615	936	1,226	1,266

Source: Based on Information about the functioning of the Act on Social Cooperatives from the years 2010-2015; Statistics of the Department of Funds of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, based on data received from the District Employment Agency; National Court Register.

The dynamic increase in the number of social cooperatives since 2011 was caused by projects financed by the Human Capital Operational Programme 2007-2013 (HCOP) (Izdebski, Ołdak, in: Żołędowski, Ołdak, 2015, p. 18). However, it should also be remarked that in the years 2010-2014, the amount of the funds transferred within the formula of entrusting the execution of public tasks with social cooperatives increased from approx. PLN 1 million to PLN 19.7 million. While in the formula of support in the same period, the amount increased from PLN 30,000 to PLN 436 million (Information for the years 2010-11, pp. 14-15; Information for the years 2014-2015, pp. 25-26; Report for the years 2014-2015, pp. 13-33). It means that public administration bodies

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## Summary

The issue of employment seems particularly important in view of the changes occurring in the current economy. International competition and technical progress destroy currently relatively stable and well-paid jobs in industry, but instead create jobs in services. Despite the increase in productivity in the global perspective, and the creation of new jobs, the latter are usually unstable and not as well-paid. Hence the expansion of subsidised employment seems to be an action more conducive to resolving difficult social issues than the current expansion of the welfare sphere. Quite recently still, in line with the theory of compensation (or job readsorption), economists believed that the market mechanism effectively cushions the effects of technological changes, creating at least as many new jobs as it eliminated<sup>3</sup>. It seems, however, that this mechanism gradually stops working, the increase in productivity of highly qualified work acts to the detriment of the workforce with medium and low qualifications, decreasing their share in the national income, and partly also eliminating them from the labour market (cf. Acemoglu, Autor, 2012). Many people who belong to these groups, not being able to find employment, become marginalised to the sphere of those living on welfare. In this context, it is worthy of consideration whether social cooperatives, receiving constant, and not temporary subsidies or occasional support from public institutions, could become the foundation of a Polish ELR programme, eventually contributing to permanent reduction of unemployment among the weakest groups on the labour market. This idea can be deemed bold, but is this not precisely what we need in the face of the occurring changes?

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<sup>3</sup> According to the standard economic theory, technical progress destroys some part of jobs, as it replaces humans with machines. At the same time, however, it creates new ones, firstly in manufacturing of these machines, secondly, a decrease in prices and increase in real income caused by technological progress drives demand for all goods, which generates secondary increase of demand for work. The net effect of all these processes may be negative in the short-term, but in the long-term it should at least compensate for the initial reduction of jobs. This theory is as logically correct, as it is in conformity with stylized facts from economic history. However, it features significant problems: (1) readsorption occurs at the level of global economy, but not necessarily at the level of domestic economies; (2) technical progress increases demand for highly qualified work, and decreases demand for low qualified work, which leads to long-term unemployment and (or) low income in the latter group. Cf. Kwiatkowski, 2002, pp. 46-57; Vivarelli, 2012.

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